



**spread seeds**

Words: **Abi Bliss**  
Illustration: **Emily Twomey**

Outside folk's garden, roots music is sprouting o'er hill and dale

- Nina Nastasia** *You Follow Me* (Fatcat)
- Basia Bulat** *Oh, My Darling* (Rough Trade)
- Valet** *Blood Is Clean* (Kranky)
- Pantaleimon** *Cloudburst* (Durtro Jnana)
- Thee, Stranded Horse** *Sometimes On Churning Strides* (Blank Tapes)

What does folk music mean to you? When I was a child and the world of adults was puzzling and tiresome in equal measure, it meant people with colourful waistcoats and greying plaits, and Sixties survivor names like Finn or Dr Burke's Remedy. You might see them busking in town on Saturday, every raucous, knees-up dance number weighed down by a ballad drawn out to tedious length. It made more sense later, with long summer evenings on deserted beaches and Fairport Convention on the stereo, exploring piss-stinking concrete pill boxes as Sandy Denny's sorrow drifted out to sea.

That's folk, all right, but as much as it was abundant in Dorset (a place where liking The Levellers wouldn't get you laughed out of town), it's not my folk. Those tales of 18th Century smugglers or murder among the wheat sheaves were as exotic to hear about as the characters on Lou Reed's *Transformer*, another childhood favourite. So now I'm faced with a clutch of albums that are all, in some way, considered 'folk' – at least the internet says so – and I have no idea what that means anymore. No one here seems to really get their cues from Harry's Smith's *Anthology Of American Folk Music* or Sacred Harp singing, and even if they did, chances are it would be a product of a trip to the record shop rather than wisdom learned at Grandma's knee. No longer tied to the

land, songs and people move around, wrenching folk's head from its body. And what then? At worst, you're left with an empty skull around which words and notes rattle rootlessly, in empty reverence to 'tradition'. Alternately, you take a kind of rawness and directness of spirit, plant it in new earth and see what emerges.

**Nina Nastasia** does just that, in music seemingly squeezed fresh from David Grubbs' immortal "*cold washrag of a morning*". A collaboration with regular drummer Jim White, *You Follow Me* meets the usual harshly beautiful standards, her dry, bitter voice and the astringent Albi engineering offering a fast-acting emotional purgative with no comfort food for afters. White's drum lines swell and skitter, cutting across the

**No longer tied to the land, songs and people move around, wrenching folk's head from its body**

resolute guitar or sharing its martial stomp, while Nastasia sings like a scornful little lighthouse holding out against the storm, blinking implacably with a blazing yet oblique lyrical beam. You can look straight into the heart of her songs, but it will leave you blinded and none the wiser.

Springing fully formed from the Rough Trade catalogue like Athena from Zeus' skull, Toronto singer-songwriter **Basia Bulat** could be considered the bounteous summer goddess to Nastasia's wintry Persephone. OK, no points for the mixed myths, but Bulat flourishes strings, handclaps, breathless strumming and a touch of Latin shimmy over places Nastasia would leave bare, while the two share a boldness and economy that cuts through the speakers. Despite that, her voice is, well... nice. Not nice-as-in-inoffensive, or nice-as-in-little-girl,

but genuinely nice, like Natalie Merchant with the weight of putting the world to rights replaced by the weight of her heart. In the wrong hands such a voice could be a showy millstone, but her band sweep along with no room for lingering, except for the heavy-headed 'Birds Of Paradise', a quavering bar-room bawl kept for the moment when self-pity comes in double measures.

**Valet** is a solo project from Honey Owens, sometime guitarist for Sacred Harp-loving musical quilters Jackie-O Motherfucker. *Blood Is Clean* sees her bypass the chants and gospel themes to tap into a pulsing artery of galactic resonance. The title track rouses itself to a Velvets-esque throb of heart-thumping toms and cauterising guitar, but for much of the album Owens is the guardian of a primal sleeping force, cooing refractive lullabies and bubble-kisses of guitar over an uneasy cauldron on the edge of stirring. There's probably too much of this stuff in the world already, but hey, that never stopped people writing hymns.

For one track at least, Valet leaks across the astral plane into **Pantaleimon's** 'Cloudburst' EP, as Andria Degens' soft vocals echo onto a wiry, see-sawing drone. The rest, however, are instrumental tracks, a collection of pieces recorded for the *Soundtrack For An Exhibition* installation by Band Of Susans' Susan Stenger. Degens' guitar pluckings inhabit a Japanese water garden realm of mannered simplicity and loaded silences, where every finger squeak and droning bass note takes on a sculptural significance.

'Cloudburst' is pretty, but those arpeggios get a better deal in the hands of Frenchman Yann Encre, who crafts guitar and kora into songs of quiet insistence as **Thee, Stranded Horse**. Sometimes on *Churning Strides* he lets the fingerpicking run away with him; more often it trickles from his fingers with the nimbleness you'd expect from a man who mostly sings like more worldly José González, but occasionally as though he has Neil Young stuck up his nose. And as Louis Armstrong said, "All music is folk music. I ain't never heard a horse sing a song".